THE WAFFEN SS AT THE BATTLE OF KURSK

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Prior to beginning a study of the Waffen SS, and its impact at the Battle of Kursk, it is necessary to have an understanding of what the Waffen SS really was.

Of all the German organizations during WWII, the SS is by far the most infamous, and the least understood amongst average historians. The SS was in fact not a monolithic "Black Corps" of goose stepping Gestapo men, as is often depicted in popular media and in many third rate historical works. The SS was in reality a complex political and military organization made up of three separate and distinct branches, all related but equally unique in their functions and goals. The Allgemeine SS (General SS) was the main branch of this overwhelmingly complex organization, and it served a political and administrative role. The SS-Totenkopfverbande (SS Deaths Head Organization) and later, the Waffen SS (Armed SS), were the other two branches that made up the structure of the SS. The Waffen SS, formed in 1940, was the true military formation of the larger SS, and as such, it is the main focus of this paper. Formed from the SS-Verfungstruppe after the Campaign in France in 1940, the Waffen SS would become an elite military formation of nearly 900,000 men by the time World War II was over. Its units would spearhead some of the most crucial battles of the war, while its men would shoulder some of the most difficult and daunting combat operations of all of the units in the German military. The Waffen SS is sometimes thought of as the fourth branch of the German Wehrmacht (Heer, Luftwaffe, Kriegsmarine) as in the field it came under the direct tactical control of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW, or High Command), although this notion is technically incorrect as strategic control remained within the hands of the SS. To this day the actions of the Waffen SS and its former members are vilified for ultimately being a part of the larger structure of the political Allgemeine SS, regardless of the fact that the Waffen SS was a front line combat organization.

The Waffen SS itself was something unusually special. It had started out as a small-sized personal bodyguard for Adolf Hitler, but gradually expanded into a full-scale military force under the guidance of a number of disgruntled former Army officers who saw the Waffen SS as a chance to break out from the conservative mold that the German Army had become mired in. The Waffen SS was designed from the start to be a highly mobile assault force whose soldiers were well versed in the art of handling modern, close-combat weapons. The training regimen therefore resembled that given to special commandos in other countries, but it pre-dated U.S. and British commando training by nearly a decade.

Waffen SS recruitment standards went through several stages during the course of the war. Designed at first to be an elite formation of Germans, it grew to be so large through attrition, and the demands for replacements, that it inevitably abandoned all but its most basic requirements, and opened its ranks to anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality. In the beginning, recruitment standards for Waffen SS soldiers were very stringent. Potential recruits were expected to be between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, and a minimum of sixty-nine inches tall. They also could not have a criminal record of any kind. Enlisted men were required to have a pure "Aryan" genealogy dating back to the year 1800; an officer's genealogy had to be pure dating back to the year 1750. The requirements were in fact so stringent that only fifteen out of every one hundred applicants were accepted. It is also worth stressing that the stringent selection process that was maintained in the elite divisions during the early part of the

war meant that men who could have served as NCOs and junior officers in other units, served as Privates in the best SS units.

The young men who joined the SS were trained like no other army in the world. Military and academic instruction was intensive, but it was the physical training that was the most rigorous. They excelled at sports, and each of them would have performed with distinction at the Olympic Games. The extraordinary physical endurance of the SS on the Russian front was due to this intensive training. It was on the front lines that the results of the SS physical training could really be noticed. An SS officer or NCO had the same rigorous training as the soldiers. The officers, NCOs, and privates competed in the same sports events, and only the best man won, regardless of rank, creating an atmosphere that sponsored team work, mutual respect, and reliance. This created a real brotherhood which literally energized the entire Waffen SS. In one field, that of internal personnel organization, the Waffen-SS has yet to be imitated much less surpassed. The Waffen-SS was probably the most "democratic" armed force in modern times. Rigid formality and class structure between officers and other ranks was strictly forbidden. An officer held down his position only because he had proven himself a better soldier than his men, not because of any rank in society, family connections or superior academic education.

There was also the ideological training. They were taught why they were fighting, and saw the kind of Germany that was being resurrected before their very eyes. They were shown how Germany was being morally united through class reconciliation and physically united through the return of lost German homelands. They were made aware of their kinship with all of the other Germans living in foreign lands, such as Poland, Russia, the Sudentenland, and other parts of Europe. They were taught that all Germans represented an ethnic unity.

Young SS men were educated in two military academies, one in Bad Tolz, the other in Braunschweig. These academies were totally different from the grim barracks of the past. Combining aesthetics with the latest technology, they were located in the middle of hundreds of acres of beautiful country.

The SS had proved themselves in action. They were not empty talking politicians, but they gave their lives, the first to go and fight in an extraordinary spurt of comradeship. This comradeship was one of the most distinctive characteristics of the SS: the SS leader was the comrade of the others. The relationship of equality and mutual respect between soldiers, NCOs, and officers was always present. SS officers and NCOs always led their troops into battle, and were the first to meet the enemy. Half of all of the SS divisional commanders were killed in action. There is not another army in the world where this happened. SS soldiers were not sent to slaughter by behind-the-line leaders, they followed their leaders with passionate loyalty. Every SS commander knew and taught all his men, and could expect the loyalty of their men by their example. The life expectancy of an SS officer at the front was three months; an NCO was only expected to survive 9 weeks.

Waffen SS basic training lasted three weeks. The focus, aside from the physical training already mentioned, was character training, and weapons training. From the outset the system promoted combat training and maneuvers at the expense of traditional drill. The focus was on battlefield tactics and independently thinking officers and NCOs. An SS recruit might be told to dig himself into the ground knowing that within a prescribed time, tanks would drive over his head, whether the hole was completed or not.

A new form of soldiering emerged. Waffen SS troops could cover three kilometers in full field dress in twenty minutes; such a thing was unheard of in the Army. The Waffen SS believed in stressing aggressiveness, initiative, and self-reliance. These were achieved by realistic live firing exercises, rigid discipline, and obedience. As a result, the premier Waffen SS Divisions had superior marksmanship skills, and was very proficient at night maneuvers and camouflage techniques. The Waffen SS was always open to new ideas and innovations in terms of training; the Panzer crews of the 12th SS Panzer Division were required as part of their training to spend a week working on the assembly line at the MAN tank factory in Nuremburg. As the war progressed, lessons learned on the field of battle were quickly adopted in the training establishments. This was often to teach the problems encountered in various terrains and climates, and techniques to overcome these obstacles, and ultimately saved many lives.

The SS soldiers were held to higher standards and were subjected to the strictest discipline. Sentences handed down by SS courts were more severe than sentences passed by other courts for the same offense. There also was a camaraderie fostered by informal relationships between the officers, NCOs, and men, in contrast to the stiff discipline prevalent in the regular German army and the Allied forces. Officers and men addressed each other as "Kamerad" when off duty. An example of discipline in the Waffen SS was the standing rule that locks were forbidden on lockers; such was the emphasis on trust and loyalty. Obedience was unconditional. This helps explain the remarkable ability of the Liebstandarte (LSSAH) and Hitlerjugend (HJ) divisions to quickly incorporate and indoctrinate raw replacements.

It did not take long for the initial resentment of the Waffen SS by the Army to grow to admiration, and from late 1941, the Army often became dependent on them. The Waffen SS came to be known as the "Fuhrer's Fire Brigade", always being sent into difficult and even impossible situations to bolster or rescue regular Army units, often at great costs in both men and equipment to them. The Waffen SS were often kept at the front for prolonged periods of time without rest or refit because their qualities were so often needed and depended upon it was feared that whole fronts might collapse. As General Eberhard von Mackensen wrote: " Every division wishes it had the Leibstandarte as its neighbor, as much during the attack as the defense. Its inner discipline, its cool dare deviltry, its cheerful enterprise, its unshakeable firmness in a crisis ... its exemplary toughness, its camaraderie (which deserves special praise), all these are outstanding and cannot be surpassed ". In July 1941 the LSSAH took part in the invasion of Russia and it was during this campaign that the Waffen SS, and in particular the LSSAH earned their reputation for their ferocity during battle. The eagerness of the Waffen SS for combat coupled with their fanaticism bordered on the reckless and during the opening stages of World War II, many of them were killed in action.

The weapon used by the Waffen SS at the Battle of Kursk that I will focus on in this paper is the Panzerkampfwagen VI, or "Tiger". It is probably the most famous and feared German tank of the war, and rightfully so. The Tiger was manned by a crew of five, three of whom manned the turret and main gun. The first of these was the Commander, typically an NCO, the most important member of the crew. His central role involved the sighting of targets, and directing other members of the crew from his rotating cupola situated at the left rear of the turret. The commander's role called for high levels of concentration and coordination, attributes that were especially critical

during close-quarter combat. The second crewman, located inside the cramped turret below, and in front of the commander was the gunner. His primary tasks were traversal of the turret, the sighting of targets, and the firing of the 88mm L/56 Kwk main gun. The third member of the crew, located on the right hand side of the turret was the loader, who was responsible for the loading of the appropriate type of ammunition as specified by the gunner into the breech of the main gun. The fourth position was that of the driver, who was seated in the front of the hull on the left hand side. It was the driver's sole responsibility to maneuver the vehicle safely and coordinate effectively with the commander. In more experienced crews, the driver more often than not assisted the gunner in locking onto targets by turning towards the enemy, a technique which compensated for the slow rate of turret traverse in the Tiger. The fifth and final crewmember was the bow machine gunner/radio operator, who was seated at the front of the hull to the right of the driver. As the title suggests, this man was responsible for maintaining radio contact with other tanks in the platoon, and for manning the MG34 machine gun mounted in the front plate of the hull.

The battlefield strengths of the Tiger were essentially defined by the vehicles two major characteristics. First, was its exceptionally thick armor plating, particularly in the front hull and turret, which was in some places 100mm thick. Second, was its powerful 88mm L/56 KwK main gun. During the battle of Kursk, the standard opponent faced by Tiger crews was the Russian T-34. Although a formidable tank for it's time, the T-34 would have to close in to suicidal distances to even have a chance against a Tiger. Conversely, the powerful gun mounted on the Tiger could destroy opponents at massive distances. On the wide expanses of the Russian front, these capabilities more than made up for the Tiger's inherent weaknesses, which included its slow rate of turret traverse, lack of mobility, and vulnerable rear and hull top armor plate. The 88mm L/56 KwK main gun was an adaptation of the successful anti-tank version of the famous "eighty-eight" Flak gun, and was capable of penetrating 112mm of armor at a distance of 1400M. It was capable of firing armor piercing, high explosive, or high explosive, anti-tank rounds. Each Tiger carried 92 rounds of main gun ammunition, and was also equipped with two 7.92mm, MG34 machine guns for use against infantry personnel, and light vehicles.

The Battle of Kursk was a significant battle on the Eastern Front of World War II. It remains the largest armored engagement of all time, and included the most costly single day of aerial warfare in history. Initiated as a German offensive, the Soviet defense managed to stop their ambitions and launch a successful counteroffensive.

The German Army relied on armored forces to push through enemy lines at high-speed, the famous Blitzkrieg tactic. This meant they were only able to assume the offense during the summer when the Russian summer had dried out the ground enough for the tanks to be highly mobile. The Eastern Front had thus developed into a series of German advances in the summer, followed by Soviet counterattacks in the winter.

In the winter of 1942 the Soviets won conclusively during the Battle of Stalingrad. One complete German army had been lost, along with about 300,000 men, seriously depleting German strength in the east. With an Allied invasion of Europe clearly looming, Hitler realized that an outright defeat of the Soviets before the western Allies arrived was unlikely, and decided to force the Soviets to a draw.

In February and March 1943 Erich von Manstein had completed an offensive during the Second Battle of Kharkov, leaving the front line running roughly from Leningrad in the north to Rostov in the south. In the middle was a large 200 km wide and 150 km deep salient (bulge) in the lines between German forward positions near Orel in the north, and Manstein's recently captured Kharkov in the south. Manstein pressed for a new offensive based on the same successful lines he had just pursued at Kharkov, when he cut off an overextended Soviet offensive. He suggested tricking the Soviets into attacking in the south against the desperately re-forming 6th Army, leading them into the Donets Basin in the eastern Ukraine. He would then turn south from Kharkov on the eastern side of the Donets River towards Rostov and trap the entire southern wing of the Red Army against the Sea of Azov.

OKW did not approve the plan, and instead turned their attention to the obvious bulge in the lines between Orel and Kharkov. There were three complete armies in and around the salient, and pinching it off would trap almost a fifth of the Red Army's manpower. It would also result in a much straighter and shorter line, and capture the strategically useful railway town of Kursk located on the main north-south railway line running from Rostov to Moscow.

In March the plans were settled. Walther Model's 9th Army would attack south from Orel while Hoth's 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf under the overall command of Manstein would attack north from Kharkov. They were to meet near Kursk, but if the offensive went well they were allowed to continue forward on their own initiative, with a general plan to create a new line on the Don River far to the east. Unlike recent efforts, Hitler gave the General Staff considerable control over the planning of the battle. Over the next few weeks they continued to increase the scope of the forces attached to the front, stripping the entire German line of practically anything remotely useful in the upcoming battle. The battle was first set for May 4, but then delayed until June 12, and finally July 4 in order to allow more time for new weapons to arrive from Germany, especially the new Tiger tanks. It is worth discussing this plan in terms of the traditional, and successful, blitzkrieg tactic used up to this point. Blitzkrieg depended on massing all available troops at a single point on the enemy line, breaking through, and then running as fast as possible to cut off the front line troops from supply and information. Direct combat was to be avoided at all costs; there is no point in attacking a strongpoint if the same ends can be had by instead attacking the trucks supplying them. The best place for Blitzkrieg was the least expected, which is why they had attacked through the Ardennes in 1940, and towards Stalingrad in 1942.
OKW's Operation Citadel was the antithesis of this concept. The point of attack was painfully obvious to anyone with a map, and reflected World War I thinking more than the Blitzkrieg. A number of German commanders questioned the idea, notably Heinz Guderian.

The German delay in launching their offensive gave the Soviets four months in which to prepare, and with every passing day they turned the salient into one of the most heavily defended points on earth. The Red Army laid over 400,000 landmines and dug about 5,000 kilometers of trenches, with positions as far back as 175km. In addition, they massed a huge army of their own, including some 1,300,000 men, 3,600 tanks, 20,000 artillery pieces and 2,400 aircraft. It was still unclear whether or not it would help; in the past the Germans had overrun their lines with seeming ease.

In the four months before the Germans felt ready, they had collected 200 of the new Panther tanks, 90 Elefant tank destroyers, every flyable Henschel Hs 129 ground attack aircraft, as well as a host of Tiger Is and late model Panzer IVs. In total they assembled some 2,700 tanks and assault guns, 1,800 aircraft and 900,000 men. It was the greatest concentration of German fighting power ever put together. Even so, Hitler expressed doubts about its adequacy.

Preliminary fighting started on the 4th of July. In the afternoon Junkers Ju 87 Stukas bombed a two mile wide gap in the front lines on the north in a short period of 10 minutes, and then turned for home while the German artillery opened up to continue the pounding. Hoth's armored spearhead, the 3rd Panzer Corps then advanced on the Soviet positions around Savidovka. At the same time the Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Regiment attacked Butovo in torrential rain, and the high ground around Butovo was taken by 11th Panzer Division. To the west of Butovo the going proved tougher for Grossdeutschland and 3rd Panzer Division who met stiff Soviet resistance and did not secure their objectives until midnight. In the south the 2nd SS Panzer Corps were launching their preliminary attacks to secure observation posts, and again were met with stiff resistance until assault troops equipped with flame-throwers cleared the bunkers and outposts. At 2230 the Soviets hit back with an artillery bombardment which, aided by the torrential rain, slowed the German advance. By this time Zhukov had been briefed on the information about the start of the offensive gained by the German prisoners and decided to launch a pre-emptive artillery bombardment on the German positions.
The real battle opened on 5 July 1943. The Soviets, now aware even of the exact time, commenced a massive artillery bombardment of the German lines 10 minutes prior. This was soon followed by a massive attack by the VVS on the Luftwaffe airbases in the area, in an attempt to reverse the tables on the old German "trick" of wiping out local air support within the first hour of battle. The next few hours turned into what is likely the largest air battle to ever be fought. The Luftwaffe defended itself successfully and lost very little of its fighting power, but from now on it was challenged by the Soviets.

The 9th Panzer Army in the north found itself almost unable to move. Within only minutes of starting forward they were trapped in the huge defensive minefields, and needed engineering units to come up and clear them under artillery fire. Model's army had fewer tanks than Manstein had in the south. He also used a different tactic, using only some units at a time thus saving the others for later use, whereas the Germans usually would attack with everything they had got to maximize the effect. This was something they were able to do because of their superior training of low-ranking officers and individual soldiers. For some reason Model did not use this tactic, though.

After a week they had moved only 10km into the lines, and on the 12th the Soviets launched their northern arm against the 2nd Army at Orel. The 9th had to be withdrawn and their part in the offensive was over. Their casualty rate versus the Red Army was about 5:3 in their favor. This was however far worse than usual, and very far from where it needed to be in order to keep up with the steady influx of new soldiers and materiel for the Red Army.

In the south things went somewhat better for the Germans. The armored spearhead of the Hoth's 4th Panzer Army forced their way forward, and by the 6th were some 30km behind the lines at the small town Prokhorovka. Considering that they had attacked without the element of surprise against a dug-in and numerically superior

enemy, this was quite an achievement.

The Red Army was forced to deploy troops originally planned to be used in the counteroffensive. The German flank, however, was unprotected as Kempf's divisions were stalled by 7th Guards Army, and by heavy rain, after crossing the River Donets. The 5th Guards Tank Army was situated to the east of Prokhorovka and was preparing a counterattack of their own when II SS Panzer Corps arrived and an intense struggle ensued. The Soviets managed to halt the SS - but only just. There was now little to stop the 4th Panzer Army, and it looked like a breakout was a very real possibility. The Soviets decided to deploy the rest of the 5th Guards.

On 12 July the Luftwaffe and artillery units bombed the Soviet positions as the SS divisions formed up. The German advance started and they were astonished to see masses of Soviet armor advancing towards them. What followed was the largest tank engagement ever, with over 1,500 tanks in close contact. The air forces of both countries flew overhead, but they were unable to see anything through the dust and smoke pouring out from destroyed tanks. On the ground, commanders were unable to keep track of developments and the battle rapidly degenerated into an immense number of confused and bitter small-unit actions, often at close quarters. The fighting raged on all day, and by evening the last shots were being fired as the two sides disengaged.

It was a Soviet victory only in one sense, the German attack was halted. Most Soviet tanks were destroyed by the Germans at long range, and relatively few were involved in short range exchanges of fire. German losses were actually relatively few and for most of the day they were fighting in good order. The Soviet losses were 322 tanks, of which more than half beyond repair, more than 1000 dead and an additional 2500 missing or wounded. German losses were less than 20% of that. The Germans had however planned to be on the offensive that day, and because of the Red Army attack their advance had been halted.

The overall battle of Kursk still hung in the balance. German forces on the southern wing were exhausted and heavily atritted, but at the same time faced equally weak defenses and were in excellent position, clear of the defensive works and with no forces between them and Kursk.

On 11 July in the midst of Citadel, US and British forces landed on Sicily. Hitler called von Kluge and Manstein to his Wolfsschanze headquarters in East Prussia and declared that he was calling Citadel off. Manstein was furious, and argued that one final effort and the battle could be won. Hitler would have none of it, particularly as the Soviets had launched their counteroffensive in the north.

Some German units were immediately sent off to Italy, and only limited attacks continued in the south, to get rid of a Soviet force squeezed between two German armies. On the 22nd both forces were utterly exhausted and fighting (officially) drew to a close. The battle was not a clear-cut victory for the Soviets who had suffered much higher casualties than the Germans. The Germans however had for the first time lost substantial territories during summer and had not been able to achieve their goals. A new front had opened in Italy diverting their attention. Both sides had their losses, but only the Soviets had the manpower and the industrial production to recover fully. The Germans never regained the initiative after Kursk.

The Germans lost approximately 56,000 men killed. The Soviet casualty figures were not released until the end of the communist regime, and comprised 250,000 killed

and 600,000 wounded. They also lost 50% of their tank strength during the Kursk offensive.

The fighting qualities of the Germanic Waffen SS divisions were established in the early stages of the war, and grew in intensity and did not cease until the end of hostilities in 1945. This was particularly evident on the Eastern Front where the fighting was the most brutal.

The Waffen SS won a unique reputation for daring élan and unfailing professionalism in combat. Yet if their courage was unquestioned, so too was the fear and loathing which they elicited; even eventually amongst their own people, and in the regular soldiers alongside whom they fought. The Waffen SS played a conspicuous role in most of the important German triumphs, far disproportionate to their numbers. In the long period of decline and retreat, the Germans were steadily pushed back from the east and west. Despite sustaining horrendous casualties, their discipline remained unbroken, and their fighting ardor unimpaired, almost to the very end.